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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDANIAN ELECTIONS: WOMEN CAMPAIGN HARD FOR
COMPETITIVE QUOTA SEATS

REF: A. AMMAN 4277
[1](#)B. AMMAN 3402

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In the November 20 parliamentary elections, voters will select the six seats (out of 110) in Jordan's lower house that are reserved for women. Activists and the NGO community failed to secure six additional quota seats they petitioned for, and as a result competition is fierce for two of the six existing quota seats that observers see as truly competitive. Confusion among voters (and some candidates) remains about how the quota seats are filled. While voters disagree about the performance of women in the outgoing parliament, female candidates display no inherent disadvantage in terms of campaigning, where they largely target youth and other women. End Summary.

Voters (and Candidates) Confused About the Quota

[1](#)2. (U) Six of the 110 seats in Jordan's lower house are reserved for women. As reported in Ref A, the seats are assigned on a nationwide basis to the six female candidates who receive the highest percentage of votes in their districts without winning outright. In the outgoing parliament (elected in 2003), the quota was filled by candidates from Zarqa, Madaba, Irbid, Tafila (two seats), and Karak. No female candidates in 2003 won their seats outright - the six female members of that parliament were all elected through the quota system. The introduction of a parliamentary quota for women led to the introduction of quotas for women on municipal councils as well (Ref B), with the result that women now occupy 241 seats on municipal councils in Jordan.

[1](#)3. (SBU) There are currently 212 registered female candidates running for parliament, up from forty-two who ran in the 2003 elections. A problem mentioned by all of the women running for office we have talked to is confusion among voters between the methods for calculating various quota seats. Set-aside seats for Christians, Chechens/Circassians, and Bedouin are assigned to the districts where these minorities live, and candidates run specifically for these seats. The quota for women, on the other hand, is calculated nationally. Thus female candidates are technically running for specific seats in their districts, but any of them are eligible to win a quota seat regardless of their location. In theory, all of the quota for women could be filled from one district.

[1](#)4. (C) The practical consequence of Jordan's mixed calculation methods for female candidates is that voters assume that they are running for quota seats assigned to specific districts, and are thus guaranteed election. A female candidate in Amman noted that she is constantly trying

to correct the misperception that she is only competing against other women, and that the election of a woman from her district is assured. She points out that even female candidates themselves get confused - she has seen election posters for women candidates that say, "I am registered as a women's quota candidate".

Fierce Competition

15. (C) Female candidates across the spectrum have come to recognize that the formula used to fill the quota leaves only one or two of the six available seats truly competitive. Since the quota is filled by comparing vote percentages on a national basis rather than by electoral district, female candidates from smaller districts with less competition (for example, those who can count on built-in tribal support or, in one instance, strong support from the Islamic Action Front in a district that leans heavily towards the IAF) are virtually guaranteed election. This makes it difficult for women from competitive urban districts to win election through the quota system. A female candidate in Amman told us that for her to win a quota seat, she would need just as many votes as she would need to win election outright; a candidate in Madaba expressed similar views of her district, which comprises 17,000 eligible voters.

16. (C) There is a general consensus that two current female MPs will be re-elected. Several contacts mentioned that one of them, Falak Jam'ani, a candidate in Madaba's second district, could even win a seat outright. Hayat Masimi, an IAF candidate from Zarqa, is also cited as a shoe-in. On her posters, she appears next to another IAF candidate, perhaps the first instance in Jordan of a male candidate running on a female candidate's coattails. Some contacts (including other female candidates) say that tribal loyalties in Karak and Ajloun will mean that the leading women in these districts will garner a high percentage of votes (though not enough to win outright), leaving just two quota seats up for grabs.

17. (C) NGO contacts, male candidates, and quite a few voters we have talked to have expressed concern about a dilution of quality in female candidates in comparison to the 2003 elections. Many point out that, with only forty-two candidates, the bar for quota seats in 2003 was low enough that smaller tribes were able to "sneak in" a female candidate in districts where their male counterparts would have been unelectable. Some claim that the jump to 212 candidates in the current cycle is a bandwagon effect, in which tribes whose candidates would not otherwise win - and who would typically support candidates from other families - instead put up a female candidate in the hopes of winning a seat almost by chance. Observers find these "Potemkin candidates" one-sided and unable to mount a serious campaign.

Women in the Outgoing Parliament: Pluses and Minuses

18. (C) Voters and candidates have mixed reviews of the performance of women in the previous parliament. Educated women and members of the NGO community with whom we have spoken tend to express disappointment that the women in parliament failed to act in concert to address the issues women in Jordan face. Note: Some Jordanian elites with whom we have spoken had clearly hoped that the 2003 quota would be filled by one of their own, rather than the tribal and Islamist candidates who were actually elected. End Note. An NGO activist laments that "the problem is that women don't vote for other women," and that lack of education is to blame. A candidate in Madaba complained that the rural women who served in Jordan's parliament for the past four years are "non-politicized," and simply act as yet another proxy for tribal interests.

19. (C) Among everyday voters, however, the performance of individual women produced respect for their political savvy and abilities. A former policeman from the central Bedouin district said that based on the performance of women in

parliament, he would have no problem voting for a female candidate. He also noted that three of the sixteen candidates in his district (which has three Bedouin quota seats) were women. A candidate in Amman said that aside from the confusion over quota calculations, most voters cared more about tribal affiliation and the connections of a candidate rather than gender.

Women on the Campaign Trail

¶10. (C) For the most part, female candidates campaign like their male counterparts. The main difference lies in how they approach the personal nature of Jordanian politics. A female candidate from Amman said that she approaches housewives, urging them to convince their husbands to vote for her. Note: The conventional wisdom is that men dictate the votes of their wives, but the female candidates we have met with seem to indicate that the opposite is true. End Note. Some women campaign door-to-door with their husbands so as to overcome the problems that many traditional voters would have with a woman circulating unaccompanied after dark.

Husbands also serve as an advocate with male voters, and often serve as a proxy for their wives with traditional voters. Through USAID funding, the National Democratic Institute has put on several workshops specifically for women candidates throughout Jordan on campaign techniques, which many are using in the course of their runs for office.

¶11. (C) Several female candidates express the view that the youth are their natural constituency. A female candidate in Amman has a "Facebook" community, and seeks out meetings with student clubs who are eager to support progressive women candidates. Since it is illegal to campaign on university campuses, she uses nearby cafes to meet with student supporters and sets up information booths on streets around the campus. The staff of a female candidate in Madaba is almost entirely composed of student volunteers, and she is counting on turnout among university students to boost her candidacy.

An Expanded Quota?

¶12. (C) Female candidates, along with many contacts in the NGO community, remain disappointed with the government's decision not to pursue an expanded quota for women during the previous parliament. Nadia Bushnaq, a women's rights activist in Zarqa, was part of a group of NGO leaders who appealed personally to PM Bakhit early on in the campaign season to expand the quota for women from six to twelve seats - one for each governorate. Bushnaq criticized Bakhit's "vague reasoning" for the failure to expand the quota (i.e., that the parliament did not have time to pass the necessary legislation). Our visits with candidates suggest that there is broad-based support (even among male candidates) for the expansion of the quota for women to twelve seats, and some contacts are hopeful that the political will for such a move will be mobilized during the next parliamentary session.

Hale